

Dialectics of contradictions

Life is full of polar opposites or contradictions. The opposites are inseparable, if you like, bicontinuous in nature. Logical study of the interplay between a pair is dialectics of contradictions. Now the very existence of contradictions is unsettling since they are an eternal source of tension. Several Utopian theories have promised hope of relief from contradictions. Look at one classic polar opposite pair: me versus others. Wouldn't it be great if others were not there to oppose me! 'Vedanta' offers a resolution of this problem: actually, me and you all are one and the same, part of an 'atma'. But this polar opposite is not so easily resolvable. Suppose, at least, a few others were not there to applaud me, and say 'wah' and wow, one can imagine the kind of dull life I would have! We need and don't need others. Conflict seems inevitable. Another ancient one is between continuity and change. Continuity offers security, and boredom, while change offers excitement but turmoil. Well, all of us have heard of one solution, especially from parents! If only we return to good old values It is part of an eternal search for homogeneity and so a conflictless unity. I call the proponents of this no-changers. But there is a serious problem. The values parents want their children to return to are not the same as the values which their parents wanted them to return to. If we now trace this back and back, we will find that there are no 'the good values'. Good values are like the river of Siddhartha, ever changing and yet always there! So it turns out, no-changers are actually arguing for continuous change! Besides this theoretical argument, there is this practical problem of living in caves etc. No change is no solution. Marxism has a different proposal. Conflict is 'fundamentally' economic, between the haves and have-nots, like some one else taking away the only job you wanted. One might think that contradiction vanishes if have-nots simply eliminate haves. Not so simple. Marx pointed out a strange reversal of symmetry that occurs. Have-nots, after annihilating the haves, behave like haves and the very process of elimination gives birth to new have-nots! History repeats and the sequence continues. Where then is hope? Marx assured that the series is convergent, economic disparities are eventually removed, and a conflict-free 'classless' society will dawn. There could be objections to this resolution also. What about that lovely partner who chose one but 'shifted' to that competitor of the original one? That doesn't look economics based! But Marx would say: Look carefully, may be the competitor has a Ferrari or a penthouse apartment overlooking Raj Bhavan, although I would not know why any one would ever want to overlook the Raj Bhavan. But one can still persist. What about the rich Ranbir marrying the downtrodden Deepika? Surely, it happens all the time in Bollywood. May be it does happen once in a blue moon in real life too. As is well known, scientific theories can never be proved, they can only be disproved. 'Once in a blue moon event' is then enough to sow doubts on this theory too.

It appears to me that conflicts, at least many, can never be resolved. I look closer to home to bolster my argument. Take for example the pair of learning versus passing exams. This one is well known and seems to have existed since eternity as it was there when I was a student too. You might think, well pass the exams, and the conflict is gone. Not quite. Suppose you end up in my profession, then, the contradiction will come back like a ghost, and stare in your face in the very first class you teach! Facing interviews is another place where you see the contradiction come alive. You can even think that you will junk ChE and join MBA. No, no, even that won't help. Employers seem to think that ex-engineers 'know' their analytics. Let us look at another one. Should one take a job based on the work one loves or on the fatness of the pay packet? You may think that the fat one wins hands down. Not really. Fat pay packets generally have big hidden pockets of boredom. Many a student has forsaken a hard won prize to return to studies, yes, to studies! Another great one, special to academic departments like ours, is learning versus doing. All students, and some faculty like me, find no end to learning and it follows of course that they find no time to do, research. 'But, honestly, can you do good research without learning?!' Prof Narendra Dixit recently forwarded an article that refers to this issue

(<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v426/n6965/full/426389a.html>). I have many more unresolvable conflicts, like competition and cooperation in a team, revealing and concealing in a research conference, loving what one does and doing what one loves (a few lucky ones don't have this problem!), and so on, but I don't give them since I think I proved my point.

It looks like there is no alternative but to live with polar opposites. To live with those means to find a balance. Art of living a meaningful life is wholly dependent upon the continual practice of discovering one's own balance: not imitating others'. When asked about a contradiction, that ardent believer in Marxism, Mao Zedong famously said: One must walk on both legs.

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